

**Environmental NGOs in China:  
Encouraging Action and Addressing Public Grievances**

**Monday, February 7, 2005 at 2:00 PM**

**Rayburn House Office Building Room 2255**

**Statement of**

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As an independent scholar, I hope my statement can introduce you and other policy makers in this country a new perspective on the dynamics of state controls of environmental NGOs in China. This statement is based on my Ph.D. dissertation, *Environmental NGOs in China: The Interplay of State Controls, Agency Interests and NGO Strategies*, completed in August 2004 at Stanford University. The statement I make today represents my personal opinions only and does not reflect the views of any organizations I was previously or am currently affiliated with. In my ten minutes I will introduce the design and implementation, and then four of the main findings of my research. My findings indicate that despite onerous state control measures, environmental activists were able to create NGOs and operate with a fair amount of freedom by censoring activities of their NGOs. Understanding the growing autonomy and self-censorship of Chinese NGOs provides considerable opening for international organizations to assist Chinese environmental NGOs.

**Study Design and Implementation**

The goals of my research is to understand how the Chinese state has officially described its control of NGOs, how the state has controlled environmental NGOs in practice, and how environmental NGOs have interacted with the state to conduct their activities. To achieve my research goals, I analyzed China's NGO policies and regulations to identify measures the state has employed to control NGOs, surveyed a group of eleven national and eleven Beijing environmental NGOs to understand how NGO control measures were enforced in reality based on these NGOs' experience, and conducted three case studies to further examine how different environmental NGOs had interacted with government agencies at national and local levels to save three endangered wildlife species. The NGOs I studied included both formally registered government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) with over ten full-time staff members and unregistered citizen-organized NGOs with only few volunteers. From 1999 to 2003, I made four trips to China and stayed in China for a total of 21 months. During these trips, I interviewed governmental officials, NGO staff members, NGO researchers, environmental volunteers, and environmental experts. In addition, I collected multiple sources of evidence such as governmental documents and NGOs' internal documents.

**Research Findings**

Four main findings of my dissertation are:

**1. The Chinese State has developed a vigorous set of NGO regulations to control the development and activities of NGOs. Three key control measures of these regulations are:**

- An NGO has to be registered at a civil affairs office according to its geographic scope of activities;
- An NGO has to find a supervisory organization to sponsor its registration with a civil affairs office. Here, a supervisory organization, referred to as a "mother-in-law organization" by some scholars, is a state-authorized organization that sponsors an NGO's registration application to a civil affairs office, and then supervises the NGO's activities after the NGO registers with the civil affairs office; and
- Civil affairs offices will force NGOs to correct any violations of above-noted and other NGO control measures.

## **2. Some of the 22 environmental NGOs I surveyed experienced no strict state control declared in NGO regulations.**

Based on experience of the 22 NGOs, I found that some of these NGOs violated above control measures without being punished by civil affairs offices. For example, five citizen-organized NGOs were not registered with any civil affairs offices as independent NGOs but conducted their activities openly without experiencing any explicit control exerted by any government agencies. For those NGOs registered with civil affairs offices, civil affairs offices had only controlled the registration of these NGOs. A common statement made by my NGO interviewees was that civil affairs offices had barely interfered with their NGOs' operations. In contrast to civil affairs offices, supervisory organizations of those GONGOs included in my study did not only supervise the operations of these NGOs, but indeed exerted financial and/or personnel control over those NGOs.

## **3. The state's control has been implemented in the ways described above because of the state's decreasing administrative capacity, the interests of supervisory organizations that control NGOs for their own ends, and ability of the NGOs to censor themselves to the degree that their activities does not lead to repressive actions by the state.**

Civil affairs officials I interviewed stated that their offices had limited resources to track and correct every NGO violation. In addition, because civil affairs offices had no resources to register all prospective NGOs and the Chinese government had a policy to encourage voluntary activities as a way to advance the well-being of society, civil affairs offices allowed the existence of unregistered NGOs as long as these NGOs had not committed any financial misdeeds or posed any political threats. This strategy of civil affairs offices was well acknowledged by the 22 environmental NGOs I studied. According to my interviewees, self-censorship of these NGOs helped them avoid any unwanted attention of civil affairs offices. Although some of the 22 NGOs violated formal control measures, leaders of these NGOs were aware of the limits on how far they could go in violating controls without attracting negative attention from the state.

In terms of government agencies acting as supervisory organizations of the GONGOs included in my study, I found that self-interests motivated these supervisory organizations to exert financial and/or personnel control over the GONGOs they supervised. In practice, supervisory organizations used the GONGOs to engage in international cooperation projects, to raise funds, to provide services, and to place excess employees when their agencies are downsized.

**4. GONGOs are generally effective in performing tasks related to official responsibilities of their supervisory organizations, such as policy consultation and information exchange. In contrast, citizen-organized NGOs were engaged mainly in three types of activities: public education, environmental advocacy, and grassroots environmental activities.**

This finding is based on the daily activities of the 22 NGOs and their efforts in the three wildlife conservation cases. Citizen-organized environmental NGOs included in my study were especially effective in mobilizing resources to challenge local development decisions that were detrimental to the natural environment. However, I found no NGOs took any confrontational approaches to conduct their activities.